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ABSTRACT

This study investigated variations in adolescents' relationships with mothers and fathers. Two questions guided the study: (1) Are differences in the features of adolescents' relationships with parents related to adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, or parents' gender?; and (2) Are differences in parents' influence related to adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, or parents' gender? Fifty-seven adolescents in grade 7 and 38 adolescents in grade 10 completed surveys about their relationships with mothers and fathers. Significant main effects were found for adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, and parents' gender. Compared to tenth graders, seventh-graders reported more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships with mothers and fathers. Male adolescents reported more subjective closeness to mothers and fathers than did female adolescents. Further, adolescents reported more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships with mothers than with fathers. Girls reported spending more time and doing a greater number of activities with mothers whereas boys reported spending more time and doing a greater number of activities with fathers. Adolescent girls indicated a bigger difference between reports of subjective closeness to mothers and fathers, in comparison to boys. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/KB)

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Relationship Features and Strength of Influence from Mothers and Fathers: Adolescents' Grade and Gender Differences

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Poster presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Society, New Orleans, LA, June 2002.

Abstract

This study investigated variations in adolescents' relationships with mothers and fathers. Two questions guided this effort: (1) Are differences in the features of adolescents' relationships with parents related to adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, or parents' gender?; and (2) Are differences in parents' influence related to adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, or parents' gender? Adolescents in grades seven (N = 57) and ten (N = 38) completed surveys about their relationships with mothers and fathers. Significant main effects were found for adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, and parents' gender. Seventh-graders, as compared to tenth-graders, reported more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships with mothers and fathers. Male adolescents reported more subjective closeness to mothers and fathers than did female adolescents. Further, adolescents reported more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships with mothers than with fathers. A significant parent gender by adolescent gender interaction emerged.

Introduction

Parent-adolescent relationships are complex and constantly evolving. Variations in the features of these relationships and the strength of parents' influence are linked to differences in outcomes for adolescents (Grotevant, 1997). As a result, it is valuable to investigate whether the features of parent-adolescent relationships and the strength of parents' influence vary as a result of adolescents' age, adolescents' gender, and parents' gender.

Adolescents' age and adolescents' gender are related to variations in parent-adolescent relationships. Parents spend more time with younger adolescents (Montemayor & Brownlee, 1987) and younger adolescents report more intimacy in relationships with mothers and fathers (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Mothers tend to make more positive attributions about the academic performance and prosocial behavior of younger adolescents (Cote & Azar, 1997). Further, older adolescents report less parental acceptance and reciprocity, along with decreased child compliance and communicativeness (Collins & Russell, 1991). With respect to adolescents' gender, adolescents identify (Starrels, 1994) and spend more time with the same-sex parent (Bryant & Zick, 1996). Moreover, mother-daughter relationships tend to be the closest and father-daughter relationships the least close, with mother-son and father-son relationships falling in between (Steinberg, 1996).

Parents' gender has been linked to differences in parent-adolescent relationships. In general, adolescents spend more time and engage in more activities with mothers than with fathers (Montemayor & Brownlee, 1987; Sprinthall & Collins, 1995; Steinberg, 1996). Mothers serve as sources of information and functional support, and engage in caregiving, overseeing chores, and listening to the adolescents' personal problems (Montemayor & Brownlee, 1987;

Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Although fathers also serve as sources of information and functional support, they tend to be more involved in play, recreational activities, and interactions with instrumental goals (Collins & Russell, 1991; Montemayor & Brownlee, 1987; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). In addition, relationships with fathers, as opposed to those with mothers, are perceived to offer less reciprocity and fewer opportunities for intimacy (Collins & Russell, 1991).

As noted above, previous research has examined a limited set of relationship features or employed a global assessment of relationships. Collins and Russell (1991) suggest that parent-adolescent relationships may be more differentiated or more complex than this research would lead us to conclude. Thus, in order to provide a clearer picture of the complexities of parent-adolescent relationships, one must employ a more differentiated view of relationship features and a broader view of the domains of parental influence. Towards this end, the present study examined five features of parent-adolescent relationships and five domains of parental influence.

Research Questions

- ❖ Are differences in the features of adolescents' relationships with parents related to adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, or parents' gender?

- ❖ Are differences in parents' influence related to adolescents' grade, adolescents' gender, or parents' gender?

Method

Participants

- 95 adolescents from a rural school district
- 57 seventh-graders (30 male, 27 female)
- 38 tenth-graders (13 male, 25 female)

Procedure

- All participants received parental consent.
- Participants provided self-reports regarding five features of their relationships with mothers and fathers and five domains of parental influence.

Measures

- **Frequency of Interaction (Time)** - adolescents' reports of the average amount of time spent alone with each parent during the past week.

- **Diversity of Activities (Activities)** - adolescents' reports of whether or not they did 36 common activities (e.g. "fixed a meal" and "went for a walk") alone with their mother or father in the past week.

- **Positive** and **Negative emotions** - adolescents' reports of the frequency during the past week with which they experienced six positive emotions (e.g. "cared for" and "happy") and 13 negative emotions (e.g. "sad" and "frustrated") in relationships with mothers and fathers (Scale: 1 = "never or almost never" to 5 = "almost always").

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- **Subjective Closeness** - the summed score of adolescents' responses to two questions regarding their feelings of closeness to their mother and their father (Scale: 1 = "not close at all" to 5 = "very close"):
    - Compared to all your other relationships (friends, siblings), how would you describe your relationship with your mother (father)?
    - Compared to what you know about other teenagers' relationships with their mothers (fathers), how would you describe your relationship with your mother (father)?

- **Strength of Influence** - adolescents' reports of the strength of mothers' and of fathers' influence in five domains (Scale: 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "a great extent"):
    - Chemical Use – four items (e.g. "Whether I use drugs"; "Whether I attend a party where alcohol will be available").
    - Problem Behavior – four items (e.g. "How late I stay out at night"; "Whether I do an act that breaks a rule or is against the law").
    - Academic Motivation – six items (e.g. "How I act in school"; "My attitude/thoughts/feelings toward school").
    - Self-Esteem – six items (e.g. "The way I feel about myself"; "The way I feel about success and happiness in the future").
    - Social Activities – eight items (e.g. "When or how much I see my friends"; "Whom I date and/or how often I date").

Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are reported in Tables 1 and 2. The data were analyzed using a 2 (gender of adolescent) x 2 (grade of adolescent) x 2 (gender of parent) x 10 (relationship features) Repeated Measures Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). See Table 3.

Differences Associated with Adolescents' Grade

- Seventh-graders, in comparison to tenth-graders, reported spending more time and engaging in more activities with mothers and fathers.
- Seventh-graders reported experiencing more positive emotions in relationships with mothers and fathers and feeling closer to mothers and fathers.
- Seventh-graders, in comparison to tenth-graders, reported that mothers and fathers had more influence on their chemical use, problem behavior, academic motivation, self-esteem, and social activities.

Differences Associated with Adolescents' Gender

- Male adolescents reported more subjective closeness to mothers and fathers than did female adolescents.

- There were no significant adolescent gender differences for the influence domains.

Differences Associated with Parents' Gender

- Adolescents reported spending more time with and engaging in a greater number of activities with mothers, in comparison to fathers.

- Adolescents reported experiencing more positive emotions in their relationships with their mothers and feeling closer to their mothers.

- Adolescents reported that mothers, as compared to fathers, have greater influence on their chemical use, problem behavior, academic motivation, self-esteem, and social activities.

Interaction of Parent Gender and Adolescent Gender

- Girls reported spending more time and doing a greater number of activities with mothers, whereas boys reported spending more time and doing a greater number of activities with fathers.

- Adolescent girls' indicated a bigger difference between reports of subjective closeness to mothers and fathers, in comparison to boys.

Discussion

The present results support the findings of previous research and highlight the value of adopting a differentiated approach for examining parent-adolescent relationships (Collins & Russell, 1991). The results of this study indicate that differences do exist in the features of adolescents' relationships with mothers and fathers and that some of these differences are associated with adolescents' grade and gender. Moreover, the multiple features of relationships and various domains of influence considered provide a more detailed view of parent-adolescent relationships.

Complex patterns emerged when relationship differences were examined relative to adolescents' grade and adolescents' gender. Seventh-graders, as compared to tenth-graders, reported more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships with mothers and fathers. These grade differences may be attributed to the greater autonomy and freedom given to older adolescents (e.g., Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996). Similarly, the broader and more differentiated social world of older adolescents offers more potential sources of influence beyond those provided by mothers and fathers (Collins & Laursen, 2000). In addition, an interesting parent gender by adolescent gender interaction was found. Specifically, male adolescents engaged in more activities and spent more time with fathers, whereas female adolescents engaged in more activities and spent more time with mothers. These differences may be due, in part, to the processes of gender socialization, wherein gender identification is facilitated by interactions with the same-sex parent (Maccoby, 1998).

Across grade and gender, adolescents reported more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships with mothers than with fathers. These findings echo previous research and point to the gender-differentiated nature of parents' behavior. In our society, mothers usually play the predominant role in rearing children, and spend considerably more time in direct physical and nonphysical care of adolescents (Bryant & Zick, 1996; Larson et al., 1996). However, when considering differences in the behavior of mothers and fathers,

adolescents' gender must taken into account. Specifically, as discussed above, the present findings parallel previous research and point to more involvement and closeness in same-sex, parent-adolescent pairs (Steinberg, 1996).

Our understanding of parent-adolescent relationships could be further enhanced through consideration of other aspects of relationship functioning. For example, the parent gender by adolescent gender interaction observed in the present sample might not emerge in samples of different populations. Specifically, variations in parents' marital status or the gender configuration of the adults in the home may affect parent-adolescent interdependence as well as processes of gender socialization. Family configuration, parents' education, parenting style, and traits of parents and adolescents, among others, also should be considered in order to provide a clearer picture of parent-adolescent relationships. Finally, the present findings are suggestive of developmental change in parent-adolescent relationships. Future research should employ a longitudinal design in order to track the course of relationship development and examine additional relationship features and other domains of parental influence.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Seventh- and Tenth-Graders' Reports of Relationships with Mothers and Fathers, M (sd)

	Seventh-Grade	Tenth-Grade
Time		
Mothers	451.87 (279.15)	326.22 (189.01)
Fathers	299.88 (223.82)	184.54 (140.77)
Activities		
Mothers	13.56 (5.57)	9.71 (4.50)
Fathers	10.60 (7.46)	5.74 (3.92)
Positive Emotions		
Mothers	3.93 (0.65)	3.50 (0.87)
Fathers	3.63 (1.01)	3.03 (1.08)
Negative Emotions		
Mothers	1.75 (0.58)	1.96 (0.58)
Fathers	1.69 (0.80)	1.91 (0.88)
Subjective Closeness		
Mothers	8.18 (1.71)	7.50 (2.17)
Fathers	7.28 (2.21)	5.92 (2.74)
Chemical Use		
Mothers	3.69 (1.51)	3.02 (1.28)
Fathers	3.38 (1.74)	2.51 (1.46)
Problem Behavior		
Mothers	3.70 (1.08)	3.49 (0.91)
Fathers	3.39 (1.37)	2.68 (1.28)
Academic Motivation		
Mothers	3.79 (0.84)	2.98 (0.96)
Fathers	3.45 (1.29)	2.60 (1.26)
Self-Esteem		
Mothers	3.36 (0.79)	3.07 (0.89)
Fathers	3.06 (1.18)	2.34 (0.99)
Social Activities		
Mothers	3.08 (0.77)	2.70 (0.64)
Fathers	2.72 (1.05)	2.01 (0.77)

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Male and Female Adolescents' Reports of Relationships with Mothers and Fathers, M (sd)

	Males	Females
Time		
Mothers	356.22 (244.05)	439.14 (257.52)
Fathers	316.67 (214.64)	201.70 (176.89)
Activities		
Mothers	10.86 (5.63)	12.98 (5.22)
Fathers	9.81 (6.05)	7.69 (7.11)
Positive Emotions		
Mothers	3.79 (0.72)	3.74 (0.81)
Fathers	3.54 (0.95)	3.27 (1.17)
Negative Emotions		
Mothers	1.82 (0.57)	1.85 (0.60)
Fathers	1.68 (0.65)	1.86 (0.96)
Subjective Closeness		
Mothers	8.12 (1.80)	7.73 (2.02)
Fathers	7.60 (2.16)	6.02 (2.58)
Chemical Use		
Mothers	3.60 (1.50)	3.27 (1.41)
Fathers	3.16 (1.70)	2.92 (1.68)
Problem Behavior		
Mothers	3.57 (1.07)	3.66 (0.98)
Fathers	3.13 (1.28)	3.09 (1.45)
Academic Motivation		
Mothers	3.66 (0.86)	3.30 (1.03)
Fathers	3.33 (1.23)	2.92 (1.40)
Self-Esteem		
Mothers	3.30 (0.82)	3.19 (0.85)
Fathers	2.88 (1.14)	2.67 (1.18)
Social Activities		
Mothers	2.89 (0.74)	2.96 (0.74)
Fathers	2.45 (0.93)	2.39 (1.08)

Table 3: MANOVA Results

	Multivariate†	Univariate	Significant Differences
Between-Subjects			
Adolescent grade	2.81**		
Time		10.06**	7th graders > 10th graders
Activities		19.62***	7th graders > 10th graders
Positive Emotions		7.88**	7th graders > 10th graders
Subjective Closeness		4.99*	7th graders > 10th graders
Chemical Use		5.98*	7th graders > 10th graders
Problem Behavior		4.89*	7th graders > 10th graders
Academic Motivation		12.11***	7th graders > 10th graders
Self-esteem		6.98**	7th graders > 10th graders
Social Activities		11.38***	7th graders > 10th graders
Adolescent Gender	2.30*		
Subjective Closeness		5.65*	males > females
Within-Subjects			
Parent Gender	6.24***		
Time		24.51***	mothers > fathers
Activities		22.31***	mothers > fathers
Positive Emotions		11.87***	mothers > fathers
Subjective Closeness		14.31***	mothers > fathers
Chemical Use		12.68***	mothers > fathers
Problem Behavior		23.29***	mothers > fathers
Academic Motivation		9.12**	mothers > fathers
Self-esteem		20.38***	mothers > fathers
Social Activities		39.83***	mothers > fathers
Parent Gender x Adolescent Gender	2.21*		
Time		12.67***	mothers: females > males fathers: males > females
Activities		11.42***	mothers: females > males fathers: males> females
Subjective Closeness		6.40*	difference between mothers & fathers: females > males

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$; †Multivariate degrees of freedom = 10, 82

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